

QC0070 - infidelity!

In my opinion, infidelity is one of the most destructive blow that can be delivered to a marriage.

It's even worse than the death of a spouse, because when a spouse dies, it's not intentional or desired. But with infidelity, a spouse...someone who has promised to be faithful...consciously engages in an act that breaks that faith.

When a spouse dies, it's a loss, but it's not a betrayal. And when a spouse dies, you don't have to continually see that spouse.

Infidelity can put a marriage on the critical list. Some marriages end. Some never really recover. And some actually go on to be much better than they ever were.

So I want to take some time and look at infidelity: What causes infidelity, what does infidelity do to a marriage, and what you can do when infidelity comes to light.

WHAT IS IT?

When we hear the word "infidelity" we typically think of a spouse who has a sexual encounter outside of their marriage and with someone other than their spouse. And this is certainly the height of infidelity.

But at it's core, infidelity refers to being unfaithful to a partner.

I believe that when a spouse turns to someone else for the close emotional and relational connection they should only receive from their spouse, they are being unfaithful. This is often referred to as an "emotional affair." An emotional affair can be just as devastating to a marriage as a sexual affair. And left unchecked, these emotional affairs often morph into sexual affairs.

For the purpose of this podcast, we're going to be focusing on sexual infidelity. But the principles will relate to other types of infidelity as well.

WHAT CAUSES INFIDELITY?

People give many reasons for their infidelity...

- There was alcohol involved.
- The other person aggressively initiated it.
- I didn't intend to do it, it just happened.

There are lots of reasons given for infidelity, but they usually fit into one of two broad reasons...

An unplanned, impulsive decision.

There can be those times when a spouse wasn't planning to be unfaithful, but acted impulsively, without thinking. These can be fueled by alcohol or other substance, or a spouse can wind up submitting to a strong sexual aggressor.

I personally believe that unplanned and impulsive unfaithfulness is a quite small percentage of infidelities. I believe that most infidelity falls into the second category...

An on-going drift in the marriage.

This is a slower and more subtle approach. In this case, there has been a slow and progressive drift and distancing in the marriage...long before the infidelity becomes a reality.

The grind of work, kids, and life start taking their toll on the marriage. Spouses begins to take each other for granted and they stop meeting each other's needs. Consequently, the gap between them grows larger and the connection between them grows weaker. And eventually, the atmosphere for infidelity is set.

So, then a spouse crosses paths with someone who takes an interest in them. Maybe they take an interest in the spouse's work, or their hobbies, or their personality. And it all may be innocent at first, but then they gradually start spending more time together. Then they start looking for ways to connect. As the connection/attraction between them grows stronger, the connection/attraction in the marriage grows weaker. And eventually, they've crossed so many lines that it becomes a small step to cross the last line.

But whether the infidelity was an unplanned and impulsive decision, or it was the result of an on-going drift in the marriage, the infidelity will have destructive consequences on a marriage.

WHAT DOES INFIDELITY DO?

Just what exactly does infidelity do to a marriage?

Infidelity can effect couples in many little ways, but at it's core, infidelity destroys the safety of marriage. Marriage is meant to be a haven of safety in the midst of a threatening and hurtful world.

But infidelity destroys that safety by destroying the three elements that promote safety in marriage...truth, trust, and commitment.

Think of a triangle. Triangles are used in construction, because they gives strength and stability to the structure. But if one side of a triangle is bent or taken away, it loses its strength and collapses.

Think of a marriage as a triangle. the first side is truth, the second side is trust, and the third side is commitment. If any of these is damaged, the marriage becomes weak, compromised, and in danger of collapsing. Infidelity deals a destructive blow to all three sides of marriage...truth, trust, and commitment.

This is why infidelity is so crippling to a marriage, and why so many marriages never recover from the infidelity.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN INFIDELITY IS DISCOVERED?

So if infidelity deals such a crushing blow to a marriage, what can you do when you discover a spouse's infidelity.

When infidelity is revealed in a marriage, there are three basic options:

1. End the marriage.

For some marriages, the breakage of truth, trust, and commitment is too much for the hurt spouse to overcome. The infidelity is just too overwhelming and they just can't conceive of continuing in the marriage.

If the betrayed spouse is a Christian, they may fall back on Jesus' allowance of divorce for reasons of unfaithfulness, and end the marriage.

Infidelity will end many marriages, but others will turn to the second option...

2. Try to just put it in the past and move forward.

In this option, the betrayed spouse doesn't feel the freedom to end the marriage, but facing the infidelity seems too daunting. So much to the relief of the spouse who was unfaithful, the betrayed spouse concedes to try to put the infidelity behind them and focus on moving forward.

Though this may sound good, and even gracious, to avoid dealing with the infidelity is a lot like ignoring a cancer diagnosis. It often destroys the marriage slowly from the inside out.

This brings us to the third option, and the one that I believe holds the most promise...

3. Commit to seeing a counselor and doing the hard work of repair.

Let me say up front, this is the hardest of the 3 options. It can feel brutal, because it forces you to face the infidelity in great detail, when you would rather just try to forget it and move on.

But if your marriage is going to heal and grow stronger, the terrible wound of infidelity must be opened up and cleaned out before it can be stitched up and healed.

Counselors differ in their approach to helping marriages recover from infidelity, but here the general approach I take when trying to help a couple recover from an affair...

- **There's an initial meeting with both spouses.** This is to get the story and a feel for each spouse's desire and investment.
- **Next, there's an individual session with each spouse.** This is not for the purpose of keeping secrets from each other, but rather to help each spouse be a little freer without worrying how their words might hurt the other.
- **Session four is a disclosure session.** At this session, the betrayed spouse can ask the betraying spouse any and all questions that are important to them. The questions can range from "Did you tell them you loved them?" to "Where and how did you have sex." The purpose of the session is not about being voyeuristic, but rather to start rebuilding truth in the marriage. As you can imagine, this is a difficult session.
- **The remaining sessions focus on rebuilding the marriage and addressing anything that contributed to the marital drift.** This is where we address the things that contributed to getting them to this point.

As you can tell, this is not a quick and easy process. And issues from the infidelity can continue to crop up long after the fact. But it is a process that will give the marriage the biggest chance of not just surviving, but of thriving.

Does every marriage survive infidelity? No. Some don't survive because the offender won't submit to doing whatever is necessary to re-instill trust in their spouse. Others don't survive because no matter how hard the betrayer works to repair things, the offended spouse just can't (or won't) let go of the offense so they can move on.

So, when it comes to counseling, there are no guarantees, but there are some strong possibilities.

A FINAL WORD...

Infidelity can ravage a marriage, and it's effects can continue to pop up long after the fact. But with a lot of hard work and rebuilding of truth and trust, safety can be restored and a couples can build a marriage that's stronger after the infidelity than before. I know, cause I've seen it.